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The autobiography of a seventeenth-century stationer and bookbinder

David Stoker

According to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, Dr Robert Norgate (d.1587), vice-chancellor of Cambridge University and Master of Corpus Christi College, had but one son. This was Edward Norgate, a noted heraldic painter and art connoisseur, who accompanied King Charles with his expedition into Scotland in 1639 as Windsor Herald.^{[1](#)} However, a manuscript in the Norfolk Record Office indicates that Dr Norgate had two other sons, one of whom survived to adulthood, to become a London stationer and bookbinder. The manuscript in question consists of five closely written leaves dated 5 February 1632/3,^{[2](#)} which were either extracted from, or else intended for insertion within, a quarto family Bible. The manuscript includes instructions as to where each section of the matter was to be inserted. Two of these leaves contain the brief autobiography of 'John Norgate, Senior, Cittizen and Stationer of London', a man whose career is not otherwise well documented. These were to be inserted 'at the end of the Singing Psalmes'.

John Norgate was born in Cambridge, 21 January 1587/8, after the death of his father. According to Robert Masters, the historian of Corpus Christi, Dr Norgate died so poor 'that his goods were sold by a decree of the vice-chancellor for the payment of his debts and funeral charges, there being then large arrears due to the college.'^{[3](#)} One further misfortune experienced by the family was that the new baby was born 'lame one all his right side', and throughout his life he 'did write altogether with his left hand'. John Norgate's autobiography shows that he nevertheless mastered the technique of writing in a beautifully clear and well formed hand, which is eminently legible today.

A few months after the death of her first husband, the Robert Norgate's widow Elizabeth married a twenty-one year old scholar, Nicholas Felton, who brought up his step-children and fathered three further children of his own.^{[4](#)} In January 1593/4 the family moved to

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London, where Felton was appointed Rector of St Antholin's and Bow Churches. Elizabeth died in January 1605/6, but her second husband subsequently went on to achieve substantial fame and ecclesiastical preferment. He became a Doctor of Divinity in 1603, and a Royal Chaplain in 1608. He was also one of the translators of the *Authorised* version of the *Bible*, and later held a living in Much Easton, Essex. He became a Prebendary of St Paul's Cathedral and in 1616 the Master of Pembroke Hall Cambridge. A year later he was appointed Bishop of Bristol, and in 1617 the Bishop of Ely. He died in October 1626.

On 29 December 1607, the crippled John Norgate, was apprenticed by his step-father to the bookseller Richard Bonyon at the sign of the Spread Eagle St Paul's Churchyard for seven.⁵ The young man was then almost twenty. Richard Bonyon may have had two premises for he also published works from the Red Lion on London Bridge in 1609, and appears to have moved in 1611 to a larger shop at the 'Fleur de Lys and Crown' in St Paul's Churchyard.⁶ He must have died soon afterwards, for his apprentice was then transferred to Edward Bishop, at the 'Brazen Serpent' in St Paul's Churchyard. John Norgate completed his apprenticeship in December 1614, and was made a freeman of the Stationers' Company 9 February 1614/5.⁷

According to Norgate's autobiography he then 'set up shop on London Bridge at the signe of the Sheefe of Arrowes on Wednesday the 31 day of May 1615'. Eleven months later he married Mary the daughter of John Mathew, 'a maide borne in the parish of St Georgies in Southwarke', and their first child, a son also named John, was born 29 January 1617/8. Over the next six years they had a further two girls and one boy, but only the first son and the elder daughter Mary survived infancy.

It is possible that John Norgate's bookselling business did not prosper, or else he found himself unsuited to the trade, for according to the autobiography on Thursday 12 August 1624 he:

gaue over his shop on London Bridge, by the will and commandment of ... his most loving Father in Law... and then he let it unto John Spencer Stationer, after he had kept it 9 yeares 2 moneths and 12 daies.⁸

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He begane to learne to Binde Bookes in Leather and past boords and all other waies vpon Munday the 16 day of August 1624. and although he weare lame and vnfitting to doe it, yet he gaue his mind soe much vnto it, that it pleased God soe to blesse and prosper his poore indeauers their in, that through his owne Industery, and practise, he brought his worke to soe good a perfection in a short time that it was very well liked, of his worke masters about the riall Exchange, and all other that he doth worke vnto, that now he doth liue altogether by that Trade. Gods holy name be glorified for it, and make him euer thankfull vnto him for his inestimable goodnesse and mercy towards him therein.

Little more is known of the elder John Norgate's career as a bookbinder. He had borrowed 20s from the English Stock of the Stationer's Company in November 1631,⁹ and his name is found, together with other contemporary stationers, on an assessment of 1632.¹⁰ He continued to take on apprentices until 1637,¹¹ and his surviving son became a Freeman of that company on 5 March 1637/8,¹² which may be a clue to the date of his retirement or death. No surviving examples of Norgate's bindings are known to the author of this note, and a search for further information in the heraldic manuscripts associated with his famous brother Edward Norgate has likewise been unsuccessful.

John Norgate's autobiography indicates that he took an active interest in astrology. All the dates in his account are given very precisely, and the exact times of the birth of each child together with the positions of the planets are also specified. In addition, the manuscript also contains various instructions and advice of an astronomical and astrological nature. For example 'Three Tables, 1. for the Moone Shining. 2. For the Circle of the Sunn and the 3. for the Tides, on the backside at the Tickle of y^e Bible', or 'A Table for the Signes in Mans Body on the backside of y^e Tickle of the new Testament'. He was also greatly attached to the memory of his step-father, describing him as 'A most Reuerend, Graue, Learned and Religious good man, and liued a most Godly, Christian and Charitable Life. Beloued of God, and all good men.' Part of his autobiography therefore consisted of 'a Memoriall of the proceedings of this my most Honorable and

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Loueing Lord and Father in Law, which I gathered, some by himselfe in his life time, some by others, and some of my owne knowledge'.

Footnotes

- [1.](#) Edward Norgate (d.1650) is also noticed by *D.N.B.*
- [2.](#) Norfolk Record Office, MC 175/1/1-5.
- [3.](#) Robert Masters, *The history of the college of Corpus Christi and the B. Virgin Mary, Cambridge*, 1753, p.118.
- [4.](#) *D.N.B.* gives Nicholas Felton's date of birth as 1556 whereas John Norgate states categorically that he was born in Yarmouth 3rd August 1563, the third son of John Felton, an Alderman of that town.
- [5.](#) D.F. McKenzie, *Stationers Company Apprentices, 1605-1640*, Charlottesville, 1961, pp.43, & 46.
- [6.](#) R.B. McKerrow, *A Dictionary of the printers and booksellers in England, Scotland and Ireland, ... 1557-1640*, (Oxford, 1910), 42-3, and Peter W.M. Blayney *The bookshops in Paul's Cross Churchyard*, London, 1990, p.13 and p.68.
- [7.](#) This was the date given by Norgate. According to Edward Arber, *A transcript of the registers of the Company of Stationers of London 1554-1640*, 5 vols. London, 1875-94) III., 684, the date was 12 December 1614.
- [8.](#) John Spencer became a Freeman of the Stationers' Company 1 March 1624/5, and remained a member of the book trade until at least 1638. He was subsequently Library Keeper of Sion College until his death in 1680, R.B. McKerrow, *A Dictionary of the printers and booksellers in England, Scotland and Ireland, ... 1557-1640*, (Oxford, 1910), 252-3.
- [9.](#) Willam Jackson, *Records of the Court of the Stationers Company 1602-1640*, London, 1957, p.233.

[10.](#) Jackson, p.424.

[11.](#) McKenzie, 102.

[12.](#) Arber, III. 638.